

## **Ukrainian Cooperation in the Genocide of a Nation: Case Study of the Jewish Plight of Dnepropetrovsk**

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### **Abstract**

*The city discussed in this paper is unique in the way the Germans annihilated the Jewish population and in the participation of the indigenous populace. The city of Dnepropetrovsk in eastern Ukraine, in which only twenty-five percent of its Jewish population remained by the time the Nazis arrived is extraordinary. How did the Holocaust happen in Dnepropetrovsk? How did the local population allow it to happen? The answers to those questions lie in its history. In reviewing the events that occurred during the Holocaust in central Ukraine and the city of Dnepropetrovsk, it becomes clear that the Nazis would not have succeeded in killing hundreds of thousands of Jews in central Ukraine had the Ukrainians refused to cooperate with them.*

Approximately one and a half million Jews lived in the Soviet Ukraine before the war. More than half of them lived in central and eastern Ukraine in addition to a small population of East Galician Jews who had arrived there after the annexation from Poland in September 1939. Only two *Einsatzgruppen*, units C and D, were deemed sufficient to deal with this large Ukrainian Jewish population. The reason: the *Einsatzgruppen* arrived in this region after the vast, almost untouched, Jewish population residing in Eastern Galicia and Lvov had been annihilated; thus, the burden of killing the Jews in the newly acquired territories of central and southeastern Ukraine actually diminished. In such towns of the pre-Russian Ukraine as Nikolaev, Kherson in southern Ukraine, Uman, Khmelnik, Brailov, and others in central Ukraine, only a fifth to a quarter of the Jews remained.

Furthermore, as previously mentioned, many Ukrainians admired and collaborated with the Nazis.<sup>1</sup> The Ukrainians at this point presented more than three centuries of anti-Jewish violence.<sup>2</sup> Even so, the twentieth century opened up an unprecedented dimension to this age-old anti-Semitism. Hitler directed considerable attention to the Ukrainian problem, believing that it was crucial that he take advantage of the separatist tendencies among the Ukrainians in order to win them over to the German cause, while at the same time promising them a free and independent Ukraine.

Dnepropetrovsk, originally called *Yekaterinoslav*, was founded in 1778 by Prince *Potiomkin*, a relative of Tsarina Catherine II, after whom the city had been named. The city had first been established elsewhere, and in 1783 it was moved to its present location on the western bank of the Dnieper River. From its founding it was intended to be the capital of all the new areas that had recently been captured from the Turks. The entire area, with its fertile soil, was rich in produce. In addition to this, mines supplying large quantities of iron ore and coal were discovered in the surrounding areas. When railroad tracks were laid connecting Yekaterinoslav with the central region of Russia, some of the largest factories in the state were built. The lumber and grain trades blossomed. The new city thrived and its population grew quickly.<sup>3</sup>

Yekaterinoslav was one of the few cities in the Pale of Settlement where Jewish settlement was not limited, and therefore many Jews chose to make their homes there.

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<sup>1</sup> For additional information see Alexander Dallin, *The German Rule in Russia 1941-1945* (New York, 1980).

<sup>2</sup> Massacres committed by Haidamacks and Nemirov in 1632 are just few of the examples of the Ukrainian violent past. For more see Anatole Goldstein, 112-113, also *History of the Jewish People* edited by H. H. Ben Sasson. (Cambridge, 1997).

<sup>3</sup> R. J. Kaminetzky, *Nikolaev and Yekaterinoslav-Dnepropetrovsk: A History* (Kfar Chabad: 1995), 23.

Within a few years it hosted one of the largest Jewish communities in Russia. In 1897, more than 40,000 Jews were living in the city, and by 1939, that number grew to 129,000.<sup>4</sup> The first Jews who came to Yekaterinoslav were from western Ukraine; they were followed by Jews from Lithuania and White Russia. Under the oppressive rule of Nicholas I, Yekaterinoslav developed sluggishly. The Jews suffered bitterly under his rule and especially under his decree of the Cantonists, in which Jewish boys ten years of age and older were conscripted into the Russian army and forced to convert to Christianity.

Life for Jews eased somewhat with the ascension of Alexander II to the throne and the lifting of some of the restrictions against the Jews. The economic pace of life grew and strengthened, with great benefits for the Jews.<sup>5</sup> Relations between Jews and non-Jews and Jews and the government contained less friction, and government officials even showed respect for the Jews of the city.

Alas, this period of respite for the Jews was short-lived. The arrival in 1881 of Alexander III, a tyrant famous for his hatred of Jews, heralded increased persecution of the Jews.<sup>6</sup> In the south of the country—in the Ukraine—pogroms broke out against the Jews with the encouragement of the czar. Blame was placed on the Jews for every calamity, including the assassination of Alexander II.<sup>7</sup>

In that same year (1881), anti-Semitic riots in Yekaterinoslav were crushed by the city leaders. Nevertheless, violence against the Jews continued to build despite the attempts of the city leaders to maintain the peace. The instigators consisted mainly of poor workers envious of the financial success that the Jews enjoyed.<sup>8</sup>

Two years later, in 1883, these workers began to prey upon Jewish booths and stores and eventually upon Jewish houses and apartments throughout the city, looting what they could and destroying what they could not take. The police stood by passively; the army was absent from the city at the time. Only as evening approached did the army enter the city and act to stop the riots. However, the following day the riots continued. And again only as evening approached did the army finally intervene. Only the use of live ammunition and the deaths of fifteen rioters succeeded at last in containing the pogroms.<sup>9</sup>

Fear gripped the Jews following these incidents, and many left the city temporarily. During their absence, their property was stolen, and many Jews were wounded; there are no indications, however, that any Jews were killed.<sup>10</sup> With the intervention of the government, the storm slowly subsided, and community life and everyday activities resumed. What's more, the Jewish settlement expanded following the expulsions from Moscow and Rostov, when many Jews chose to settle in Yekaterinoslav. By 1889, 20,000 Jews resided in the city.<sup>11</sup> Yekaterinoslav became known as a Jewish town even though Jews remained a minority of the general population.<sup>12</sup>

Unfortunately, the more the Jews contributed to city life, the more the anti-Semitic propaganda from their Christian neighbors flourished. The propaganda incited vicious attacks against the Jews of Yekaterinoslav in 1904-1905. Although the police crushed these attacks, peace returned to Yekaterinoslav for only a short time: at the beginning of 1906, once again, masses of workers left their factories to participate in a "patriotic" parade in the center of the city that quickly turned into an attack on Jewish stores and houses in the center of the city. The mob looted and destroyed Jewish property and killed any Jews in its way. The casualties numbered more than one hundred; the wounded, many more.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>5</sup> Kaminetzky, 27, see also Howard Sachar, *The Course of Modern Jewish History* (New York, 1990), also *History of the Jewish People* edited by H. H. Sasson.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>7</sup> The Tsar who actually favored the Jews, but like the "good old times" there needed to be no logical reason for anti-Semitic hatred.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>10</sup> Sachar, 277-302.

<sup>11</sup> Kaminetzky, 29.

<sup>12</sup> Thanks to their economic involvement, their concentration of businesses in the streets and centers, and the daily influx of thousands of Jews from the surrounding settlements, the city *appeared* to be typically Jewish and thus in fact *was* considered to be Jewish.

Over three hundred stores were looted and a large number of homes were burned and destroyed.<sup>13</sup> The Jews recovered quickly yet again, but this time, they faced a change in attitude in the city government itself. All requests to the leaders of the city and the government to intercede to stop the sporadic attacks that followed were ignored.<sup>14</sup>

During this and the ensuing period of Jewish persecution, the First World War broke out. Jews from all over Russia fleeing the raging war front or confrontations with the White Russian Army began to flow into Yekatirenoslav. Moreover, the Russian government decreed that all Jews from border territories of the countries that Russia was at war with must move to the innermost parts of Russia. The government felt it could this way better control the Jews—who were supposedly not to be trusted.<sup>15</sup>

When the First World War broke out, the Jews of Yekatirenoslav hoped that the Bolsheviks would bring an end to their persecution and the pogroms that had characterized their lives. Optimistically, they looked forward to living openly as Jews in a new society based on freedom and equality for all its citizens. Indeed, for a short time, Jewish political parties were established and Jews were elected to public office. The Jews of Yekatirenoslav began to feel like free and equal citizens. Because of the prohibition against anti-Semitism by the Soviet government under penalty of death, anti-Semitic incidents petered out.

With the chaos of the civil war in Russia, the Jews suffered the most. When in the spring of 1919, the White Army led by loyalist Denikin captured the city, Jews prepared for the worst. As soon as the armies of Denikin entered the city, they began stealing and looting stores, which for the large part belonged to the Jews. At night they burst into Jewish homes, stealing whatever they found. Thousands of Jews were murdered by the White Armies, whose goal, as stated by a general from Denikin's Army, was not to fight the Bolsheviks but to kill the Jews.<sup>16</sup> The few months under the rule of the White Armies in Yekatirenoslav made the Jews long for the return of the communists. Many Jews turned to communism in the hope that under its rule their lives would improve and would be secure.<sup>17</sup>

At the end of 1919, the Red Army overthrew Denikin's White Army and expelled it from Yekatirenoslav. The Soviets imposed on the Jews numerous bans and restrictions, such as the nationalization of factories, that left many Jews destitute. During this period, the infamous *Yevseksia*, a Jewish part of the Communist Party, became active in Yekatirenoslav. Established under the auspices of the Soviet government, this Jewish department ostensibly dealt with everything Jewish while its goal was to curb Jewish individuality and religion.<sup>18</sup>

In 1926, the government officially changed the name of the city to Dnepropetrovsk, after the chairman of the Supreme Soviet of the Ukraine, Petrovsky, and after the river that flows through the city, the Dnieper River.<sup>19</sup> As the majority of the Jewish population was quickly assimilating into the new political order of Soviet Russia, their economic situation in the city improved. The greater part of the Jewish population worked in the city's large factories, and many Jews held high positions in those factories. Many Jews moved to the rapidly developing city, and by 1939, the Jewish population had increased to about 129,000 people.

In the beginning of World War II, Dnepropetrovsk remained far from the war front; thus few details about what was happening at the front filtered through to the region. In particular, the Jews of Dnepropetrovsk were unaware of German atrocities against Jews in the captured territories. As the front approached, the citizens began to prepare to evacuate the city. Government institutions began to disband as well as large factories and the institutions of the Communist Party. Many Jews who worked in these factories and institutions also evacuated the city. The evacuation was greatly disorganized, and many Jews remained in the city. However, the number of refugees grew after the German navy bombed the city at the end of June to the beginning of July 1941.

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<sup>13</sup> Kaminetzky, 31.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>15</sup> For further analysis of this issue see Sachar, 348-359.

<sup>16</sup> Levin, *The Jews in the Soviet Union*, 42-43.

<sup>17</sup> Kaminetzky, 36.

<sup>18</sup> On methods of this branch of the Soviet Government, see Levin, 55-57, 67, alienation from Jewish life, 48-49, 81-82, 85-86, campaign against traditional Jewish life, 71, 73-74, 85-86.

<sup>19</sup> Kaminetzky, 37.

Furthermore, when many of the remaining Jews, who had ignored warnings to evacuate, began to receive information regarding the German treatment of the Jewish populace, they fled to central Asia. Evidence suggests that about 90,000 or more Jews fled the city, which is 30,000 more than is recorded in German documents.<sup>20 21</sup>

The Jews who remained were those who remembered that the Germans had not been so vicious during the First World War. However, during the last days before the city was captured, these Jews gave in to a growing fear of the Germans and began to head east on wagons in large numbers, as the train ride was difficult. They did not get very far before the Germans caught up with them. Some returned to the city, and others fell into the hands of the Ukrainians and were murdered.

After heavy bombing from the air, Dnepropetrovsk was finally captured by the Germans on July 25-26, 1941. As soon as the city was captured, some of the Ukrainian citizens in the city vented their suppressed anti-Semitism by attacking and murdering Jews. The Germans also burst into Jewish homes, pillaging and murdering as they went. The Jews could not get water from the municipal faucet and were afraid to venture out for bread. Several days after the Germans entered the city, approximately 30,000 Jews of the city were forced to wear the Jewish badge under the penalty of death and were also ordered to elect a committee that was referred to as the community leadership.<sup>22</sup> All house managers were ordered to provide the command headquarters in the city with a list of their Jewish tenants, and the military administration made preparations to establish a ghetto for Dnepropetrovsk's Jews.<sup>23</sup>

On October 8, 1941, the military governor imposed a collective fine of thirty million rubles on the city's Jews. On October 13, even before the fine was collected, Einsatzkommando 6 (of Einsatzgruppe C) began rounding up Jews and confining them to a large department store in the city; from there, the Jews were taken in groups to a nearby ravine to be murdered. A total of 15,000 Jews were killed in this operation, which was followed at a later stage with the killing of the remaining 5,000 Jews.<sup>24</sup>

The operation was accomplished in the usual gruesome manner. On the intermediate days of the Jewish eight-day holiday of Sukkot, the Jews of Dnepropetrovsk were ordered by a special announcement to gather in Lux, one of the large buildings on Main Street, in order to "transfer them to an unnamed destination place for the sake of their security and safety."<sup>25</sup> The Jews had to bring all their valuables and food. Many of the Jews in Dnepropetrovsk were duped and came en masse to the building. They believed they would simply be organized into a ghetto. Once in Lux, the Jews were formed into a column and led away. When they asked where they were being taken, the Germans simply answered, "To camp."<sup>26</sup>

When Jews had passed the Jewish cemetery and came to an empty lot next to the railroad, the shooting began. At this point, people finally realized why they had been brought there.<sup>27</sup> Since it was getting dark, several thousand people were driven up against a fence and surrounded on all sides. It was cold, and the people were standing shoulder to shoulder in the icy mud. The sick and dying were simply lying in the mud. It was in this fashion, that the surviving Jews spent that long autumn night before they died. When dawn broke, the German soldiers appeared on the lot with cases of bullets. They showed the Jews those cases and laughed. Then they started forcing them toward the pits at the end of the lot. The crowd lurched to one side, the sick fell under the feet of pushing people, and everywhere screams, shots, and the cries of children could be heard. The Germans dragged old people who had been crushed by the crowd to the pits and buried them along with those who had been shot.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Einsatzgruppen Operational Report USSR, No. 135.

<sup>21</sup> Since almost all of the Jews in Dnepropetrovsk were annihilated by 1942, the number accounted to 28,000 and since there were 129,000 Jews in the city before the war, plain mathematical subtraction testifies for the above assumption.

<sup>22</sup> Yad Vashem The Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Authority, Chronology of the Holocaust, 1942-1945.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, October 8-13, 1942.

<sup>24</sup> USHRIA, r. 10, f. 7021, o. 57, d. 41, 4.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>27</sup> Jews were smart people and it was not because of their "stupidity" that they did not understand earlier where they were going. Rather, they were civilized people and could not imagine that another civilized nation would perpetrate anything remotely close to what they finally experienced face to face.

<sup>28</sup> Testimony of Mrs. B. Va. Tartakovsky.

The Aktion continued unabated until the next day. In order to muffle the screams and the sounds of shooting, the Germans brought a band to play as Jews were taken out to the slaughter. Although very few survived this bloodbath, it is not known exactly how many Jews were killed in those two days. The German detachment of the Higher SS and Police Chiefs recorded an estimate of 10,000.<sup>29</sup> But the real number is probably much higher, perhaps closer to 15,000-20,000, according to the after war research.

After the mass murder of the Jews that took place from October 13-15, 1941, the Germans covered pits with the dead bodies and wounded people and planted trees to hide the atrocities they had committed. Jews were being murdered on the outskirts of the city as well as inside Dnepropetrovsk.<sup>30</sup> Between November 7, 1941, and March 1942, School Number 9 on Mostovaya Street witnessed the murder of many hundreds of Jewish residents of the city, when it was converted into a slaughterhouse. In addition, more than fifteen hundred people were poisoned in the hospital by injections of lethal doses of morphine.<sup>31</sup>

Some of the remaining Jews tried to flee to neighboring villages and some hid in the homes of their non-Jewish neighbors. In 1942 the Nazis came to the hospital in the Eigran district. They separated the Jews from the rest of the patients and marched them out of the building. They ordered them to strip and to crawl naked on all fours and bark like dogs. They crawled in this way in the freezing cold for several meters, until they came to a ditch that had been prepared for them in the courtyard of the hospital. When they came to the edge of the ditch they were shot and their bodies were tossed into the ditch. Some of the sick were hanged on the trees surrounding the ditch. The non-Jewish patients did not fare much better. The Germans sealed them in the building and turned off the heat in the freezing winter weather; within several days all the patients had frozen to death.<sup>32</sup>

The constant beatings and brutal murders did not abate until Dnepropetrovsk and its surviving Jewish population were liberated from the Germans in 1943. When the Red Army liberated Dnepropetrovsk on October 25, 1943, only 15 Jews were left alive in the city out of the estimated 129,000 before the war and the more than 29,000 that remained in the city after the evacuation.<sup>33</sup> The city was only partially destroyed and those who had been evacuated began to return. At first, the Jews were forbidden to return to the city, excluding high government officials, doctors, and engineers, who were given special permission to return. The Jews who returned were, in many cases, received with open hostility by the local citizens. They spoke about the Jews that “were not yet slaughtered,” and vicious attacks on the Jewish returnees occurred.<sup>34</sup>

The authorities tried not to employ Jews in conspicuous positions. Anti-Semitism was rife, partly because of the Germans’ efforts to increase the natural anti-Jewish feelings always prevalent in the city. Yet, despite the many hardships and the open hatred that prevailed in a large section of the city, the number of Jews in Dnepropetrovsk continued to increase. The devastated Jewish community of Dnepropetrovsk found strength to rebuild itself partly because most of them left before the massacres were committed and partly because they had no other place to go. They came to the city of their birth and tried to rebuild their lives despite the horrific events of the previous months and overcoming the pain of losing their loved ones who had stayed behind and were brutally murdered by the Nazis and their Ukrainian collaborators.

The number of dead would have been far lower had the Ukrainians risen in protest against the German outrages and tried to aid the Jews. Even if the local population would have just sat by passively while the Germans carried out their operations, fewer Jews would have died. But the sin of the Ukraine was not just of omission, but commission; she enthusiastically offered her assistance and manpower to the Germans to make central Ukraine Judenrein. History must point the finger of condemnation at the Ukraine for her direct involvement in the vicious murder of so many innocent souls.

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<sup>29</sup> Einsatzgruppen Operational Report USSR, No. 135.

<sup>30</sup> USHRIA, r. 11, f. 7021, o. 68, d. 9, 34.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 23. In addition, the details of the massacre were described by Nikolai Batshenko, an old Ukrainian, and an eyewitness to the gruesome acts that the Germans committed at the hospital.

<sup>33</sup> Yad Vashem, October 1943.

<sup>34</sup> USHRIA, r. 11, f. 7021, o. 57, d. 4, 2.